

**Is Smith College  
fulfilling its obligation?  
*An Inquiry into Environmental  
Awareness upon Graduation***



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### **Abstract:**

This project was an inquiry into the environmental awareness, in terms of behavior and beliefs, for graduating seniors of Smith College. Nineteen seniors were surveyed with a number of questions; some yes/no questions, and other open-ended questions, along with a ranking system at the end of the survey. The findings support my hypothesis that Smith College has far to go in becoming a pioneer in being green. Additionally, growth in awareness appears to have a bottom-up effect, with students pushing for policies and practices that support environmentalism; rather than a top-down effect with administration pushing for a more environmentally conscious and aware student body. While there are many courses offered at Smith College with at least some environmental content, my recommendations consist of specific courses added to the curriculum for the early stages of education at the institution. Additionally I make recommendations (many of which were recommended by the respondents) for smaller courses of action in order for Smith College to portray, and therefore encourage an environmental awareness that will lead to behaviors that may change the state of the world.

### **Introduction**

The world is in a state of environmental peril. It is believed by many environmentalists that human behaviors must change in order for us to sustain natural resources and biodiversity. In the past 200 years, since the start of the industrial revolution, humans have directly and indirectly caused massive amounts of atmospheric and water related pollution world wide. We have also affected biodiversity through development, affecting various ecosystems. We have assisted in speeding up the natural processes of global warming by emitting gases such as carbon dioxide, methane and other gases produced by industrialism. These gases cause our atmosphere to absorb

heat and therefore cause warming, which will eventually (probably sooner rather than later) cause a destructive rise in sea levels, affecting all coastal communities. The United States and other highly developed countries especially produce ungodly amounts of waste and consume much more than needed to simply survive; overfilling landfills, burning of trash which emits pollutants into the atmosphere, and affecting the quality of groundwater.

Smith College has traditionally produced very socially conscious and aware members of the community. Graduates of Smith College over the past century have been pioneers in a variety of human and social rights such as women's suffrage, children's rights, and international relations. With the state of the world today it is imperative that this institution also produce environmentally aware and active graduates, or what Orr (2002) would describe as graduates with a "coherent, ecologically solvent world view". In considering the history and reputation of this liberal arts college, we should be setting the stage to produce graduates who will be pioneers in discovering the means to save the environment and biodiversity. Additionally, those that are not in the environmental sciences should also live in ways that encourage sustainability. It is with these imperatives in mind that I began my quest to determine whether or not Smith College is indeed fulfilling this obligation.

Smith College, at a glance, does appear to be on the 'green' side. The institution offers recycle bins in each student room and in various locations on campus and it composts food. The college has also applied stickers to light switches stating its dedication to the environment, encouraging people to turn off the lights. There are plans for a green building to be constructed to house the engineering program and the newly opened Campus Center was 'proposed' to be a green building. However, doesn't it

take more than just recycle bins and stickers to encourage, educate, and enforce environmentalism campus wide, for the future of our graduates, and the future state of the world?

The specific objective of my study was to determine whether or not Smith College was in fact creating environmentally aware, conscious, and active graduates. I was resolved to determine whether or not these graduates not only knew about environmental issues, but actually behaved in a manner that would be conducive to changing and reversing much of the damage that has been done. Do Smith College's graduates live in a manner that will be non-detrimental to our earth? My hypothesis upon beginning this project was that no, Smith College was not fulfilling this obligation and that with some changes/additions to the curriculum, this obligation to the future of our earth and the health of humankind could become more of a success.

## **Methodology**

I designed a survey and ranking system (Figure 1) and began interviewing graduating seniors. I originally intended to survey both first year students and seniors to determine the differences, if any, in behavior in terms of the environment. However, with considering that most likely other factors could play into behavioral differences, it was decided to survey only graduating seniors. It is my belief however, that the original plans for this project could be carried out at a later time by surveying incoming students and then surveying the same students again upon graduation. Hence displaying what, if any, changes had occurred in their behavior and feelings towards the environment during their tenure at Smith College.

I began the study by conducting personal interviews. I conducted personal interviews for the first nine respondents. I then began to hand out the surveys. Not only did this save time, but answers tended to be more in depth when the surveys were filled out by the respondents. Also the question regarding whether the respondents growth in awareness was because it was readily encouraged or sought out was added after interviewing the first five students, and realizing that this was a very important question to be addressed. Unfortunately, I was not able to survey as many seniors as intended (40+) and only successfully completely surveyed 19 respondents. However, it is my belief that even with such a small number of respondents, I did have a decent overview of not only the awareness level of our graduates, but also where on their list of priorities the environment falls.

## **Results:**

### *Academic Major of Respondents:*

The respondents of this survey represent 11 different majors as follows:

- 4 Biology
- 2 American Studies
- 1 Economics
- 1 Art History
- 1 Mathematics
- 2 Government
- 3 Geology
- 1 Chemistry
- 1 Studio Art
- 2 Psychology
- 1 Women's Studies

### *Recycling:*

In all five questions regarding what types of materials the respondents recycle, whether at school or at home, ~25% do not recycle (Table 1). Of those that do recycle

other materials than paper or plastic, those materials included aluminum cans, glass bottles, food composting, and clothing donation. Additionally, 24% of respondents that recycle will not continue to do so after leaving Smith College if recycling had a financial cost (Figure 2).

*Food Waste & Energy Usage:*

Of the nineteen respondents, thirteen waste less than 25% of food provided by Residence and Dining Services (RADS) and six waste between 25% and 50% of food. None of the respondents replied that they personally waste more than 50% of food provided by RADS.

Fifteen respondents (79%) claimed that they turn off the lights in their rooms when leaving for more than a few hours and thirteen (68%) graduating seniors said that they turn off other electronics such as the radio or their computers when leaving their rooms for more than a few hours (Figures 3 & 4).

Slightly more than half (10) of the respondents drive a vehicle (Figure 5). Of those ten, three drive a compact car, four drive a sedan, and three drive 'other' vehicles which consisted of a jeep, a wagon, and a Cadillac (Figure 6). None of the respondents drive an SUV or a pick-up truck (Figure 6). Of the ten respondents that drive, three (30%) replied that they would drive rather than walk downtown which is only two to three blocks from Smith College's campus.

*Growth in Awareness and Sources of Information While at Smith College:*

Replies to the question regarding whether or not the graduating seniors felt that their awareness of LOCAL environmental issues had grown due to their time at Smith

College consisted of eight (44%) yes replies. Nine replied no (50%) and one (6%) had no opinion (Figure 7). Of the positive responses six replied that their awareness of local environmental issues has grown because of other students activism, two said that course work was the reason for their growth, and two responded that the college housing Earth Reps helped in their growth of awareness. Of the negative responses, reasons included not enough open awareness and/or they were aware before coming to Smith College and that nothing had been readily and obviously available to enhance their awareness and connectivity to local environmental issues.

In terms of environmental issues on a GLOBAL scale eleven (61%) replied that their awareness had grown due to their time at Smith College and seven (31%) said that their awareness had not grown (Figure 8). Of the reasons for positive growth in global awareness, more than half of the respondents credited course work and professors and ~25% credited other students activism. Most of the students who responded that their awareness had not grown stated that what awareness they did have was present before their years at Smith College.

Of the fourteen students who were asked whether they were readily encouraged to learn about environmental issues or whether they sought the knowledge, eight of them (57%) said they personally sought out knowledge and involvement.

In response to whether they would have enrolled in a two-credit environmentally based seminar during their first and/or second year ten (53%) replied that would have, while nine (47%) said that they would not have.

The last question asked how the college can improve and encourage environmental awareness and whether or not it is important. Every respondent answered that yes, it is important for the college to do so. The results for the open-

ended part of this question will be discussed in detail in the discussion and recommendation sections of this report.

### *Ranking results:*

The results of the rankings are displayed in three different manners. The first (Figure 10) is a weighted scale. I assigned each rank a value; first=8 points, second=7 points, and so on. Therefore the item/aspect with the highest number of total points is displayed as being most important for the group of respondents as a whole. This left a total possible points of 684. Not all of the items/aspects were deemed important enough to be given a rank by the respondents, therefore there is a total amount of 629 points.

The second manner of depicting the ranking results displays how many times the respondents chose a particular item/aspect as their number one priority (Figure 11). The dominant response was 'finding a job' with nine responses. 'Economic stability' came in second place with four responses. 'Religion' and 'Level of education' were tied for third with two number one responses each. 'Other' was fourth place with one response and 'Global climate change', 'War in Iraq', and 'Having children' all having no number one responses.

The third manner of depicting the ranking results deals only with the environmental representation of 'Global climate change'. Figure 12 shows were on the priority list of graduating seniors this issue falls. For most, 'Global climate change' falls in the middle or towards the bottom of their priority list.

## Tables and Figures:

**Figure 1: Survey used to sample graduating seniors:**

Major _____	Hometown _____		
Environmental courses taken (specific and/or classes with environmental component):			
Do you recycle plastic when at school?	Yes	No	No opinion
Do you recycle plastic when at home?	Yes	No	No opinion
Do you recycle paper when at school?	Yes	No	No opinion
Do you recycle paper when at home?	Yes	No	No opinion
Do you recycle other materials?	Yes	No	No opinion

If yes, which materials:

If you do recycle, do you believe that you will continue to do so once you leave Smith College if it is not as convenient and inexpensive to do so?

Yes	No	No opinion
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How much food served by RADS do you regularly discard? < 1/4    1/4 - 1/2    1/2 - 3/4    > 3/4

Do you turn off the lights when you leave your room for more than a couple of hours?

Yes	No	No opinion
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Do you turn off other electronics (radio, computer, etc...) when you leave your room for more than a couple of hours?

Yes	No	No opinion
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Do you drive a vehicle?

Yes	No	No opinion
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If yes, what category?

Compact	Sedan	Truck (pick up)	SUV	Other
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If yes, do you walk or drive when going downtown (7/11, Pleasant St., etc...)

Do you feel that you have a better awareness of environmental issues/problems on a LOCAL scale due to your time at Smith College?

Yes	No	No opinion
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Why or why not?

Do you feel that you have a better awareness of environmental issues/problems on a GLOBAL scale due to your time at Smith College?

Yes	No	No opinion
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Why or why not?

Of the awareness and knowledge of environmental issues you have received at Smith College, would you say you received it by seeking it out, or because it was readily encouraged?

Where do you get information regarding environmental issues? (i.e. administration, other students, GAIA, classes, word-of-mouth, ES&P lunch bag series lectures, TV, radio, newspaper, etc...please name all that apply):

If Smith College had offered a variety of 2 credit environmentally based seminar courses geared towards 1<sup>st</sup> year and sophomore students, would you have enrolled in one or more?

Yes                      No                      No opinion

How could Smith College do a better job of improving environmental awareness campus wide and for its graduates, and do you feel it is important to do so?

Please rank the following according to importance/concern for you:  
1=most important

- Economic stability
- Global climate change
- War in Iraq
- Religion
- Level of education
- Finding a job
- Having children
- Other \_\_\_\_\_.

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**Figure 5: Do you own a vehicle? Error! Not a valid link.**

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## **Discussion:**

Overall, my original hypothesis holds true. Smith College is not fulfilling its obligation to the future state of the world in terms of our graduates. In relating

academic major to environmental awareness, those majoring in the natural sciences tend to be more environmentally conscious. Many of the graduating seniors that were surveyed believed that they were genuinely aware of environmental issues; however, their day-to-day behaviors prove otherwise.

While ~75% of students do recycle, considering that *every* room is equipped with recycle bins, this statistic is unacceptable. Too many times, in my own personal observations, many students use their recycle bins for trash, including those materials that should be recycled. Recycling is free for students at Smith College, therefore only a lack of awareness of the implications of not recycling and laziness can be attributed to this behavior. Twenty-four percent of respondents replied that they would not recycle upon graduation if they had to pay for it. This is a clear indication that economics mean more to these graduates than the overfilling of landfills, emission of pollutants from burning of plastics and other materials, and the overall environmental degradation caused by the lack of recycling.

In terms of food waste, our graduating seniors fair quite well. It is evident in viewing the waste of food at each meal time in my own campus house that there is a tremendous waste of food. This issue will not be delved into with great detail however in considering the changes in dining services in process currently across campus. It is my opinion that the consolidation in process will result in less waste of food.

With energy usage, 21% leave on their lights when leaving and 32% leave on other electronics. This is a very unnecessary waste of electric energy. Additionally, many lights and electronics are left on 24 hours a day including the lights in common spaces of residence houses such as the bathrooms, hallways, and living rooms. While it is

understood that lighting is necessary for safety; dimmer lights and/or motion sensed lighting could be installed to save energy.

With vehicle decisions our graduates also fair well. The majority of the respondents that drive do drive fuel efficient automobiles. I do find it outrageous, however, that people will drive two blocks rather than walk, with 30% of respondents admitting to that fact. During most times of the day, it could take longer to drive downtown and find a parking space than it would be to walk. Again, the only excuse for this behavior is lack of environmental awareness and laziness. Smith College's policy of charging \$150.00 for a campus parking permit is a good deterrent for students bringing cars to campus.

It is evident in the responses to growth in awareness that environmentalism is encouraged in a bottom-up fashion, if there is a growth at all. It is this institutions responsibility for 100% of graduates to have gained an awareness and live as such in terms of environmentalism. The college fairs better in global issues, which should be expected considering its history for global social awareness. However, it is imperative for students to gain an awareness globally, locally, and how the two relate to each other. It is also evident that most students who have gained knowledge of environmental issues and their processes did so by seeking out the Environmental Science and Policy program. While the program offers many opportunities including study away programs, lecture series, and numerous internships; only those readily involved and on the mailing list are aware of these opportunities.

The students all believe that it is important to encourage and educate environmentalism. The answers provided by the respondents to the last question regarding what the college can do to satisfy this were numerous and many seemed to be

very good ideas. The overall sense was that students feel that administration does not lead by example and therefore they feel that environmentalism is trivialized. Some of the recommendations suggested by the respondents for the administration include:

- Not allowing excessive flyers in campus mailboxes (we have already seen progress in this issue)
- Recycle bins on each floor of residence houses rather than trash cans, making it more difficult to throw items out than to recycle
- Utilizing reusable materials in the campus center (they currently use disposable materials for both eat-in and carry-out)
- Offering discounts on coffee and tea in campus center when customers bring their own mug
- Partnerships with local businesses/industries who pollute with an opportunity for student interns to access and recommend solutions to decrease pollution
- Information session on environmentalism on campus offered as part of first-year orientation

There overwhelming responses geared towards academics and curriculum.

### **Academic recommendation**

There is one major recommendation to conclude this report. I feel that it would be very beneficial to offer a variety of two-credit environmental seminars for first-year and sophomore students. There should be some that offer breadth, while others that only offer an in depth look into one or two environmental issues or concepts. The senior seminar in Environmental Science and Policy (EVS 300) could be used a basis for these

topics. While Smith College does offer many environmental courses and has other courses with an environmental component, they are not easy courses and are more than likely enrolled in by students who are genuinely already interested in environmental science. If these additional courses could be advertised as 'easy' courses compared to the typical Smith course, more students would enroll in them and as they say, we could 'hook, line, and sink 'em'. I believe that this would be a perfect opportunity to gain the interest of many more students. Some topics may include:

- Global development (a simpler version of Anthropology of Development taught by Professor Elliot Fratkin)
- Global climate change and rises in sea level: Causes, effects, and solutions
- An overview of energy: how it is produced, the emissions, the costs, the benefits
- Many ecology based topics with emphasis on the detrimental effects of removing components of the ecosystem
- Environmental justice (a great way to attract Sociology and Anthropology majors!)
- The values (economic and moral) of ecosystems and biodiversity
- Groundwater: what effects it and what can be done to protect it
- Environmental history: the McNeil text listed in the literature section would be a great basis for topics including atmospheric history, history of energy usage, etc...

These are only a few suggestions and I believe that with the many talented professors involved in the Environmental Science and Policy program from many different departments in the natural and social sciences, many more topics could be created.

I would not recommend that these courses necessarily be counted towards the minor in ES&P, but be a gateway to the program. This program has so much to offer the students of this college and these students could have much to offer for the future state of the world. First and foremost, their attention needs to be caught. I feel it would be best to limit students to two of these seminars only, similar to the performance courses offered, in order to prohibit filling their course load with 'easy' seminars and allowing them to prohibit other students from this opportunity. It is my belief that this addition to the current curriculum would be a great opportunity for Smith College to rise to being pioneers in environmentalism.

**Literature Cited:**

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